Great Frauds, Impostures and Mysteries

by Deshler Welch

Beau Brummel

ONE of the most singular of all historical characters recorded by English biographers and elaborated seriously and pedantically in their amusing way—was that of "Beau Brummel." His supposed life has supplied no end of detail for stage-plays.

He was a creature of a period of dandyism. It was a vogue, a fad, that has had something like a modern counterpart in "dudeism." But the first cult of fashion represented something better; it was a rage that corralled many distinguished and worthy men who became the "Man About Town" of that day—whose observances and sayings contained sense worth chronicling, and eventually forming valuable historical record. It was the time of the ultra "smart set" whose members, however, accomplished things with more dignity than transpires today among the people known as representing such. The former established a style of courtesy that taught men the importance of treating his fellowman with proper and polite respect, whilst the latter set has demonstrated quite the opposite.

George Bryan Brummel came upon the scene when George the Fourth was involved in the many escapades that made his career most notorious; they met first when they were mere boys, Brummel just out of Eton and ready for Oxford, and the young prince ready to pursue his battles in social life. Somehow at that first meeting the prince conceived a strange liking for Brummel, and asked him what his ambition was. On hearing that he desired most to serve the king in the army he then and there promised him a commission in his own regiment, the 10th Hussars. Young Brummel was not of high birth; his grandfather kept a candy shop and his father was a secretary to Lord North. It was through his aunt, Mrs. Searle, who was a mistress-farmer to the King, that he became acquainted with the prince and subsequently ascended the fashionable ladder of superficial fame high enough to become not only the leader of fashion but the controller of royalty itself. At Oxford he was noted for his assurance and his witticisms. He was also known as a snob. He would say of a man: "Who ever heard of his father?" and if the retort was: "Whoever heard of yours?" he was said to have such graceful insolence in defying the impunity as to put the questioner to rout in confusion. In 1794 he obtained his commission in the prince's regiment, and was at once introduced into the best society. His acceptance of social honors was one of the strangest exhibitions of self-assurance imaginable. It was not impertinence exactly that characterized it; it was more of the studied insolence of the impostor. He became through some singular mental control the favorite friend of the king. In dressing rooms he assumed the pose of haughty pride, supercilliousness, and languid disdain. He became captain in the Hussars at eighteen, but seldom attended to his duties. He declared once if it hadn't been for an individual with a big blue nose he'd be hanged if he knew which was his troop.

As he could not stand being ordered about to different places, Brummel quitted the army after a year, and sought a life of luxury and indifference to his ordinary fellow man. It was told of him at this time that one day when at his toilet a friendly bore wormed his way into the room and insisted upon questioning Brummel as to which of the Scotch lakes he preferred. But Brummel was so deeply engaged in tying his cravat that he turned to his valet and said, "Robinson, which lake *do* I prefer?"

"Windermere, sir."

"Ah, just so," then to the intruder he continued: "Windermere, will that do for you?"

Brummel was living at No. 4 Chesterfield Street. His income from his patrimony was only £1,500, and this was not sufficient to keep him in the extravagant doings of his friends. His apartments were attractively furnished and became a popular rendezvous. He did not care much for sports, but paid particular attention to his wines and to his gastronomic reputation. The Prince Regent was a frequent guest at his little dinners.

HE also gave extraordinary attention to dress; he was the dandy of the day. A young man asked him what kind of blacking was used on his boots. "Blacking, my dear sir," replied Brummel amazed. "Why I never use anything but the froth of champagne." He was really considered the best dressed man in London, and the prince himself used to visit with him in his dressing room to obtain points. Byron said of him that he preserved "the most exquisite harmony" in such matters. His appearance in society affairs was so important that many entertainments owed their success to his presence. It is difficult now to conceive how such a man could have the influence which he certainly did have. His criticism and his praise could make and break.

One of the most remarkable phases of Brummel's character was that he was in no sense a libertine. Popular and important as he was among women he was never flirtatious or known to have any passionate intrigue, or did he attempt in any way to boost his fortune by seeking an alliance with a woman in high life.

Finally Brummel had a falling out with the prince; he had attacked the conduct of Lady Fitzherbert, his mistress. This breach was not healed and Brummel made him the butt of all his fun. They would meet in all the large functions, but did not seem to see each other. In fact Brummel, with his sarcastic shafts, became the bane of the prince's life. Their singular and notable contacts were the talk of England, and the mutual affronts were even dangerous; but the prince was afraid of Brummel—no doubt about that.

IN 1812 Brummel began to frequent the clubs more than formerly, and at length got to gambling. On one evening he won £260,000 at one throw, and lost it three days after. From this time on his purse was more often empty than full. In 1815 he had lost everything, and then he tried to hold his position, first on credit, and then on borrowing. In the latter expediencies he was compelled to realize upon what a tissue most "friendship" is built. Reaching the end of his tether, Brummel made up his mind not to remain a witness to his own undoing, and he suddenly embarked for France. Arrived at Calais, he found large rooms over a bookshop, and with only a thousand guineas he had scraped up, proceeded to make himself as comfortable as possible, spending more of his money than necessary by buying antique furniture and bric-a-brac. He established an imaginary harem by having each of his plates painted with the portrait of a lady friend. He went into such foolish extravagances that he again became the talk of a public, and then it became necessary to borrow, and somehow the dukes of Gloucester and Argyle and others came forward and actually rivalled each other in providing for him! Time had lent enchantment: his friends were beginning to miss him. And then, what do you think? English society made a resort of Calais, and it was dignified, so people said, by the presence of the "sublime dandy." But this remarkable man had not been softened; he was more magnificently insolent than ever! Lord Westmoreland invited him to dinner one day at three o'clock, but Brummel declined the invitation, saying that he was not accustomed to "feed" at that hour. But just in the nick of time to save his reputation he was made consul to Caen, an aristocratic post.

After Leading the Fashions and Being Idolized by Royalty, He Died in Abject Poverty. An Object of Pity.

HIS debts began to accumulate. Creditors were first entertaining him, then boring him; he lost his office of consul, began to starve and had a stroke of apoplexy. During a partial recovery he was arrested in his bed by impatient creditors and carried off to prison in such haste he was not allowed to dress properly and this more than anything else brought him to a state of despair. Again he was unexpectedly rescued by dukes and lords of Britain.

He returned once more to his old methods and position—using cologne for his ablutions instead of water, and having thirty-six changes of linen a day! But this also came to an end, and the great Beau Brummel was brought to the direst poverty and sudden physical decay. Last of all, he became an imbecile. He was removed to the Asylum du bon Sauveur, at Caen, and placed in the ward where Bourienne had gone mad and died a few days before.

The Beau's end came peacefully March 30, 1840. He was his own greatest impostor. He created no great harm; possibly his eccentricities and his impertinence, did some good by calling the attention of others to the deceit of human conceit.